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Politics and War: A Bleak Picture

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IN THE GATHERING storm, the concerns of American politics—who happens to be up, who happens to be down—seem small potatoes. Nevertheless, the shadow of the threat of a larger war in the Mideast and Southeast Asia colors the picture of politics at home as well as abroad.

Even before the confrontation precipitated by President Gamal Abdel Nasser the split in the Republican party over foreign policy was widened. The two Republican leaders in Congress, Everett McKinley Dirksen in the Senate and Gerald Ford in the House, put out the hardest of hard lines. They attacked in violently emotional language President Johnson's concepts of building bridges with the Communist nations of Eastern Europe through removing trade barriers.

For moderate Republicans this was notice that the Congressional leadership supported the strategy of Richard M. Nixon. In his drive for the Presidential nomination Nixon is out-hawking the Administration hawks.

THE BROADSIDE fired by the Ev and Jerry team may not have been aimed at the moderates but it was an embarrassment to the approach they had planned. They had shaped their strategy around the proposed \$50,000,000 Export-Import Bank loan for the purchase of machine tools in this country for the Italian Fiat auto plant to be built in the Soviet Union. The Ex-Im loan would be part of Fiat's \$800,000,000 deal to enlarge Russia's passenger car capacity from its present dribble to a modest output.

With Sen. Thruston Morton of Kentucky taking the lead, the aim was to get approval of the loan by the Banking and Currency Committee. If it appeared necessary for Congressional action the moderates were ready to accept Sen. John Tower's amendment stating that no credits should be extended to Communist countries unless such loans were declared by the President to be in the national interest.

Sen. Charles H. Percy of Illinois, a moderate who has risen rapidly on the national horizon, had in late February gone to Detroit to make a strong speech for Gov. George Romney at the Michigan State Republican Convention. In that speech in the heart of motordom he had given his blessing to the Fiat-Soviet deal as follows:

"The recent decision of the Italian automobile firm Fiat to build a plant in the Soviet Union says much about progress in other nations.... I see the new Fiat plant in Russia as symbolic of a new era in East-West trade. I welcome the increased Soviet concentration on consumer production and especially automobile production."

This was the same line taken by every agency of Government from State and Defense through the CIA—anything that diverted production in the Soviet Union from military hardware to consumer goods was in the national interest. On this basis both Democrats and Republicans on a House Banking and Currency subcommittee reported no objections to the Fiat loan. The bank had pointed out that if the machine tools were not bought here under the loan they could be purchased in Europe.

Now, of course, with the threat of a shooting war in the Mideast this is pushed out of sight. If the present crisis ends short of war and with the integrity of Israel intact, the moderates under Morton's leadership believe the broad question of trade barriers between East and West can be reopened toward the end of the month before the Commerce Committee.

CONCEIVABLY, if the world goes to the brink again, as in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, there could be greater receptivity for measures to restore ways to live on the same planet short of the constant threat of nuclear destruction. That was one consequence of Cuba. In the aftermath of that exercise in brinksmanship President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev began their exchange of letters which led eventually to the nuclear test-ban agreement.

Nixon may win the nomination with an all-out hawkish strategy. The moderates concede this in private. But they doubt, given a continuing war situation in Vietnam, that he could defeat LBJ by calling for more and more and more. A wartime President carrying the burden of responsibility and appealing for patriotic support of American forces engaged in conflict has a very great advantage.

This is the dilemma of the opposition party on both sides of the war-and-peace issue. In a grave time like the present merely to oppose is not enough. And an alternative course is hard to come by as each week the casualty lists grow longer and the emotional tensions in the country take a deeper hold.

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